

Home base

The boundaries between office and home have melted along with those of work and play.



The twin phenomenons of earning your own living and working from home have risen simultaneously. Work itself has been unshackled from the confines of the traditional office and marauded into the home. The kitchen, coffee tables, sheds and even beds have felt this incursion in what has been a transformation in how we work.

The Blackberry [remember those?] may have kicked down the doors to the idea of 'switching off', but in just a short period, a more significant transition has occurred in the places and hours where 'work' takes place.

Much of modern work takes place on computers, but there are also people earning their living from making things or developing services from their homes.

Few of us have paid consideration to how the home adapts to be an arena where work takes place, where the development of a workspace often happens in an unplanned fashion, invariably plugging a charger in here, stacking some documents up there. Before you know it a printer hums next to the fridge.

In showcasing four people who work from home, it's been revealing that there has been a challenge in creating a space conducive for work at home, while also protecting an important haven that's distinct from 'working'.

In trying to untangle the issue, we've commissioned designer Ilse Crawford to outline how she goes about solving the challenge.

by Ilse Crawford

A survey by the Office of National Statistics earlier this year reported that almost 14% of the UK workforce is working from home. It's a figure that is growing very quickly. And if you consider the broad trajectory of how workplaces have changed over the last century, it wouldn't be outlandish to assume that a hundred years from now we might all be working at home.

From blue-collar factories to white-collar offices, open-plan to call centre cubicles where control was the dominant mission, we now work in more consciously humane offices, taking into account comfort (of body and mind), interaction and the positive effect these qualities have on productivity. Add to this the liberation mobile technology has granted us and suddenly the whole concept of an office starts to feel rather outdated.

Kitchen table

Our attitude to work has shifted dramatically too. We might still love Dolly Parton's anthem, but for most of us work is not the nine-to-five ball and chain it once was. Our work defines who we are and mastering the work-life balance today is more about coping with it, not cutting it back.

Our lives have become more

compact and flexible. Just as the barriers are melting between work and play, this is also true of the boundaries between office and home. The home office is no longer the study-cum-spare bedroom it once might have been. Floor plans have shrunk, separate rooms have given way to open-plan living and home offices have dissolved from demarcated spaces into any surface big enough for a stack of paper and a laptop. The kitchen table is a popular one, of course.

Behavioural codes

What sets the agenda for the home office today is not recreating the traditional or operational tropes of an office at home. It is a different reality and one that consequently requires a different set of codes, which are more behavioural than aesthetic. Discipline is required for it to work. The kitchen table can be a desk but it must also be cleared for meals. It's crucial to not start turning your home into an office where you happen to sleep.

It's helpful to assign chunks of time or various tasks to certain areas to break things up. If computer work takes place at your kitchen table, maybe phone calls are conducted standing somewhere else.

Always try and schedule a chunk of meetings outside so you don't find yourself locked indoors for a month (I speak here from experience).

Try and hone your daily rituals to ensure work doesn't creep up on you and take over. This applies as much to storage as behaviour. I always say each home requires between 15% to 20% storage and whilst many balk at the idea of giving up so much precious space, the consequences – particularly for homeworkers – can be dire.

When I lived underneath our studio for a decade, I was happy to accommodate stray samples when upstairs was getting overwhelmed. But fairly quickly the odd bit of

flooring fitted into 27 boxes when we moved to the new studio.

House rules

Behaviour is just as important as space. Many home workers have a 'no bedroom rule' for their phones and laptops to prevent insomnia and middle of night emailing. Others speak of the importance of having a morning routine, including exercise, showers and breakfast, before checking their inbox. Similarly after dinner is a sacred period for unwinding; there's little more depressing than firing off an email right before switching your bedside light off.

Rules are even more vital if you share your home with someone else. My husband Oscar and I have variously fought over surfaces in our single room, open plan apartment. He got his own back by snoring loudly through a client meeting. We have a truce of sorts now we've set down some ground rules and bought a desk.

How you live

In the studio we describe the red thread that runs through all our work as being 'a frame for life'; that is, creating public and domestic space that supports our lives and behaviour. In this respect, we respond to briefs for domestic projects by building homes around how our clients live.

Though many of our clients work from home, few specify the need for a dedicated home office. At most it could be a desk, but this is not a piece of furniture designed for the contract office market. Instead, just as their work pattern slips into their daily lives at home, so too does the space and furniture required to support it. As with anything in life, it's about thinking carefully, cleverly and making a decision based on what works best.

Ilse Crawford is the head of Studio Ilse, a design studio.